

Ithaca

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*Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.*

K. Kavafis, Ithaca. 1911

Itziar Barrio's project *Welcome to the New Paradise* invokes the early classics, those works about *peregrinatio vitae* – embodying the idea of life as a journey, a constant exploration, as, at the time, the authors of those works occupied societies who were still seeking the edges of the earth, still discovering the boundaries of this world, still searching for “home,” knowing that search would probably not find fruition in their lifetime. The world, an unknown eternal entity, symbolized, for them, the romantic human identity—the self even unknowable, mysterious, possibly existing partially external from the conscious. Within the self, within the world, the divine and the demonic, may coexist, forming the magical, the possible paradise. Barrio's work, as with those classics, invokes the story of the human search for the external “mysterious” element existing within or at the edges of this one- life as a journey - which, as Borges said, are stories that people have always told and will always tell. Kavafis personified brilliantly the contemporary-classic poet, revisiting the subject at the beginning of the twentieth century with *Ithaca*. The Homeric city serves as a metaphor for the trip of knowledge that is human life. The Divine Comedy is also evoked, for its allegorical and a certain epic character as well as the tripartite and descendent structure, as in Barrio's project, which takes place in the air, on the ground level and underground. Curiously, the third book of the Divine Comedy is titled *Paradise*.

The project opens with a *billboard* that crowns a five-floor building of Bed-Stuy Brooklyn in New York, a strategic enclave near the highly trafficked A metro line to Manhattan, near busy bus stops and stores. The artist creates a fusion process with her own iconography, interconnected with elements of the

cultural imagery of the area. At first sight, we face what appears to be a travel agency advertisement that attempts to swindle us into buying an idyllic vacation package. This puts us in touch with two of the leit-motifs that have lately been present in the artist's work, and which become the essential apex of the project: the idea of paradise and holidays.

The term Paradise comes from Greek *paradeisos* (Latin *paradisus*), which comes from Persian *paerdís*, that was the name of a wonderful garden marked by two walls and inhabited by human beings, implying that it was located on Earth, as opposed to the conception of the non-earth – or heavenly- paradise, which will reign throughout history.

The element of paradise relates here with the one abandoned by a large number of the Bud-Stuy residents, many of whom have emigrated from Caribbean areas. Then, the paradox arises: tropical paradise for the visitor, and slavery for the native, condemned in most of the cases to either emigrate or pay service to the tourist on holidays. For these immigrants, New York has become the *New Paradise*. The area in question is bathed by exotic echoes in bars and clubs like *The Sea Breeze* which hails awning adorned by a palm tree swinging in the wind, or the bursting sun logotype of *Golden Crust*.

The billboard connects us with contemporary concepts like the fetishism of the holidays, which began with the insurgence of the so-called leisure society. Daniel Bell, American sociologist, in his critique of the capitalist system, asserts the means by which this stimulates consumerist culture, inducing people to desire leisure, inciting them to plan their holidays, to maximize money in their free time, to appropriate social space. Leisure is a relatively contemporary concept. In 1899, the economist Thorstein Veblen, published the iconic book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, where he asserts that current society is no more than a variation of the ancient tribal life. While the rest of the economists of the time defined human beings as rational people in search of maximizing their pleasure, Veblen gives them an irrational character, accusing them of simply looking for a social status through leisure, independently of their happiness. Veblen speaks of capitalism as a form of primitive barbarism, and used the term "emulation" to describe these actions, showing, as example, those who intend to imitate the most respected members of the clan in order to gain a higher status. This is one of the points that Adorno will criticize, remarking that life in society also implies a struggle for existence. But we are not going to speak about Adorno, because I want to avoid any author of the postmodern hangover.

This is also a story that speaks about immigration and dislocation from a kaleidoscopic fragmentation, to allude to the peculiar character of areas like this, configured as some kind of *paradisiacal ghettos*. Almost an intentioned

gesture of cynicism to establish the critic of a system where the lone artist finds herself at the same time inside – as an immigrant and inhabitant of that same environment- and outside as European, legal and with the possibility of going back to her country at any moment. In this sense the project is also framed in a transition realm, which wanders between the absolute integration in the environment and its inhabitants and the terrain foreign to it, the one of the - inevitably- elitist art world.

“Welcome to the New Paradise. You, a lonely Wild Cat”

We take the Ferry, which brings us to *PUBLIC COLOSSAL* at Governors Island, a former military base now abandoned and used by different institutions to organize art projects. The exhibition takes place in a beautiful country house, which Barrio has transformed into her own personal jungle.

One room features the main video: *Welcome to the New Island*. This video, a mixing of film and animation, places two women in a tropical setting, where fireworks and pink bombs explode in the background, perhaps indicative of the bombs exploding beyond our own borders that do not shock us out of our own paradises. Another room presents a series of photographs with stereogram-like inscriptions, such as *Public* and *Colossal*, etched over lushy jungles, which formed the perfect scenery for the many tourist who trafficked the Governors Island space.

Making use of an irreverent sense of humor, Barrio’s symbolism speaks to the conscience and subconscious, like a sort of puzzle, triggering a series of mental associations. The references to the Divine Comedy become clearer when we take that final step at White Box to discover that, as in Dante’s Poem, this journey has also been a graduated physical descent, from the top of the billboard, to the subterranean space in White Box, going back to the street level of the Governors Island house.

Are we finally in Paradise?

Welcome to the New Paradise, at the renowned White Box in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, is conceived as a solo show of the artist. Once again, the video of the island – physical and simulated- articulates the show, photographs and drawings complement the setting, while banners sustained with branches create original shelters, refuge for LCD screens showing more videos. On these banners, the figurative is melded with the abstract, an abstract coming from an extract of one of the symbols that form her imagery.

Within this repertoire, the palm tree is presented as a key icon, simple and disturbing. It will also be one of the icons which forms part of the merchandising created by the artist such as caps and pins, but in this case the palms and dolphins don't show any feature of a certain origin, there is no Benidorm, Punta Cana or Hawaii, but the clean icon, pure, signifying.

Barrio encourages the spectator to explore their relation to the symbols, some of which show up and repeat themselves, taking part either in the iconographic repertoire of the artist the new islandian imagery, and this reiteration puts us in contact with the commercial realm and advertising language. In the video "Bailalo", the artist penetrates the codes of advertising seduction, the flirting of consumerism culture and our own personal desires. In it, a girl dances a striptease to sensual music, stripping her consecutive layers of t-shirts with a printed word on each, until they reveal the final sentence: *you have to know your costumer.*

Itziar Barrio develops an original deconstruction of the icons and social registers that inhabit our daily lives. She aims to distort the quotidian to establish a re-lecture of these codes while she speaks about a collective identity in a semiotic society. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek refers to the movie, *The Truman Show* by Peter Weir, and *Time Out of Joint*, by Philip K. Dick, in order to attest that the paradise of capitalist consumerism is, in its hyper-reality, somehow real, unsubstantial, deprived of any material inertia. According to the Slovenian thinker, the last truth of the de-spiritualization of the universe of utilitarian capitalism is the dematerialization of the "real life" itself, its reversal in a spectral show.

Back to the idea of Paradise; its image is associated with the literary topic of *Locus Amoenus*. Authors like Homero Virgilio, Horacio, Boccaccio and Shakespeare, speak about locus amoenus as the idealized Eden, place of encounter of the lovers. In Ovidio's *Metamorphosis*, the function of locus amoenus is reverted and instead of peace and rest, it becomes a scene of violent encounters. This ambiguity is present throughout the artist's trajectory. Her psychological-philosophic background is patent in her indirect mode of unraveling human contradictions. This background is also obvious in certain layers, like her eagerness to emerge the irrational, to melt it with the conscious, and blur the frontiers of the unconscious.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* should also be reflected in this contradiction. Excerpts from the work were used in leaflet and political discussions to illustrate contradictory perspectives. On the other hand, with the growing

industrialization, Miltonian images of Heaven and Hell were originally used as metaphors of rural paradise versus the Hell of the city.

In this line, Milad Doueihi, in his book *Earthly Paradise, Myths and Philosophies* drafts a study of the different uses of paradise throughout key moments of Western philosophy. As a result, he brings up the question of whether paradise really is the origin of human error or the utopian vision of humanity itself.

Therefore Barrio is situated in that area of “flirting with schizophrenia ” that Sloterdijk mentions in his *Critic of the cynic reason*, which, according to him, seems to be an identifying feature not only of appropriating the generation of the 80s, but also largely influences the art currently being created. The artist moves in these coordinates and somehow speaks about the difference between our vision of the world and the real one, but the last one doesn't have to win the game.

Barrio plays with image-symbols in relation to the quotidian objects, linked to behaviors that leave an uneasy, unfamiliar taste. Signs associated with a certain environment which disarticulates in order to configure a new system. On some occasions the figurative is recognizable, while on others, it is melded with the abstract, an abstract coming from a piece of one of the symbols that form her imagery, playing again with the Gestalt of the intuitive spectator itself to make their eyes able to recompose the original and identify its total extension.

Perhaps she recomposes one of the Possible Worlds of David Lewis, in which she deconstructs- and reconstructs- the “social theatre” of nowadays from a discontinuous narrative that navigates within all those intermediate territories located between reality and fiction.

Itziar Barrio embarks on the difficult journey of conjugating brilliantly an elegant classicism with the most absolute contemporaneity.

*... And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithacas mean.*